

From urban experiences to architectural narratives

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0. Introduction

Cities are a densely coded context for narratives of discovery and the recovery of experience. They have a capacity to act as condensers of information and to integrate assimilations of behaviours, people, styles, typologies, forms, ideas. Cities are comprehended through spatial practices. Movement in the city is a major practice which enables us to accumulate and organize urban experiences. It creates spatial narratives containing memories and views, specific places, objects, beginnings and ends, distances, shadows, buildings or parts of them, encounters, signs and panoramas. Urban space becomes intelligible through sequences of movement. Its complexity, mystery, splendour, rhythm, are revealed and interrelated through the route of the urban dweller.

Similarly to urban space, architectural space is perceived in terms of sequences and spatial practises. According to Jean Nouvel “To erect a building is to predict and seek effects of contrasts and linkage through which one passes...in the continuous sequence that a building is...the architect works with cuts and edits, framings and openings...screens, planes legible from obligatory points of passage”ⁱ

This parallel is being used as the underlying idea for introducing first year students to Architectural studies at the Dept. of Architecture, University of Thessaly. The didactic approach takes for granted that students are accustomed, although rather unconsciously, to navigate into the urban context and to understand its multi-layered and multi-informational structure. Therefore it tries to draw gains from previous experiences undervalued or though to be completely irrelevant to students expectations.

The idea of spatial narrative as structured by the student becomes the spine line for realizing that architecture is a complex structure, it exists in the dimension of time and movement, it becomes important not as an object of art but during a process of inhabitation and that it has the power to shape human practises.

1. Urban experience as spatial narrative

Routes and journeys are very fundamental ways people use to understand urban space and to make sense of it. They enable people to comprehend a complex structure (such as the city) and to familiarize with.

Journeys within the city can be seen as urban narratives. A road establishes a sequence, it opens possibilities of chance encounters, it can become the scope of an epic or the confines of a personal drama. It holds secrets and invites exploration or interpretation. Trees, the ground, a shop's window, crossings, advertisements, a large building or a yellow line, people's movements and gatherings, a glimpse through a window, the view of the sea, all can serve as emblems in this kind of narrative. Sequencing, setting boundaries, revealing or concealing, gathering, opening etc are

common cultural practises with strong spatial character found in all kinds of urban contexts as well as in design projects at different scales.

Walking recognises boundaries. Boundaries act as explicit signs of narration, separating the specific route from all the other places. Spatial elements (edges, openings, borders, walls), mark the thresholds to different venues, to different possibilities. Within its frame a spatial story involves places, events and actions, transitions from stasis to process. Urban routes can plot events and places into lines, create hierarchies, relate elements which have no relation whatsoever, construct scenaria (someone is waiting in front of a yellow wall. A concert poster is half hidden behind him. I have to twist to read it).

Urban space is perceived through the continuous action of movement, and it is being understood as a whole through the synthesis of various points of view and through the additions of those parts which are not seen but are understood to exist.

The urban experience has common qualities with a film's viewing. The architectural ensemble and the cine city share the framing of space and the succession of sites organized as shots from different viewpoints. Additionally, the elements of both are adjoined and disjoined by way of editing. Like film, the montage of spectatorial movements shapes architecture –apparently static – are framings of space and successions of sites which are organized as shots from different viewpoints. Additionally, these elements are adjoined and disjoined by way of editing. Like film, the experience of the city (as well as of any architectural ensemble) is shaped by the montage of spectator's movements.

2. Human body, mobility and spatial comprehension

Walking in a city means the employment of the body in the process of understanding space. It's a complex process, which involves both intellectual and physical activities. The experience of movement into an urban context is not just a visual experience. It is based on contiguity between the human body and space more close and intense than a visual one.

According to Paul Valery ⁱⁱ it is through this miraculous subject (the human body) that people are able to participate to the surrounding material world by touching and seeing and exchanging contacts and breaths with it.

The perception of space is being realized through the movement of the body. This does not mean just its general progress from one point to another. It also includes all kinds of tours and detours, long views and short glimpses, sounds and smells, stops and runs. In other words, all those functions of the human body which enable people to perceive the world.



Urban rhythms

S. Katsarou, 1st year, 1st semester, 2004)

3. The city as encyclopaedia

Urban context offers us an unlimited variation of spatial elements. Enclosures, openings, boundaries, thresholds, edges, passages, landmarks are some of the numerous categories one can name. These general categories are taking form through material constructions, objects, walls, windows, corridors, gates, facades etc. They are being materialized intentionally (ie an enclosure produced by a room's walls) or unintentionally (ie enclosures produced by lorries parked at a parking lot). Spatial formations can be permanent (such as the room) or ephemeral (such as the parked lorries).

Spatial properties refer to characteristics of the spatial elements such as geometric structures, order and disorder, horizontality, verticality, linearity, centrality, strength or weakness of boundaries, voids or overflows, transparencies, whole or fragmented views, light and shadow, multi layering, continuities and discontinuities and their constant interplay.



Cities as coded context for narratives of discovery

4. Representation: Transforming the experience into spatial patterns

Multiple representations of the individual urban routes is a key issue which links the theoretical approach to spatial understanding. Diagrams, sketches, models, photographs and montage are techniques used not just to envisage the urban narratives but to reveal and organize spatial properties and surveyed movements.

Representation is a complex process. It does not refer just to techniques but to ways of translating observed situations and abstract ideas into material products. It's a process we set up not just to express existing knowledge but to think through it.

Conventional documentation, mapping - such as maps that totalize the representation of space - are not suitable means for representing this kind of urban narratives.

Conventional maps erase the narrative actions, the journeys of discovery, the daily routines that produce the spatial patterns in the first place. According to De Certeau (121) only the cartouches of certain old maps that depict explorer's ships, travellers or surveyors' hint at this experiential dimension.

Complex representation techniques such as diagrams, models or photographic collage and three dimensional abstract models seem to be much more appropriate to represent the interplay of moving and fixed elements. Films can be important in the process of develop representation techniques for this kind of data. One could experiment with analogies drawn from cinema. Cinematic framing, sequencing, disjunction, fragments of events and superimposition are all techniques which could be employed in architectural education.

In this process of representation outcomes should be partial and unfinished. They constitute gateways to something not yet formulated.

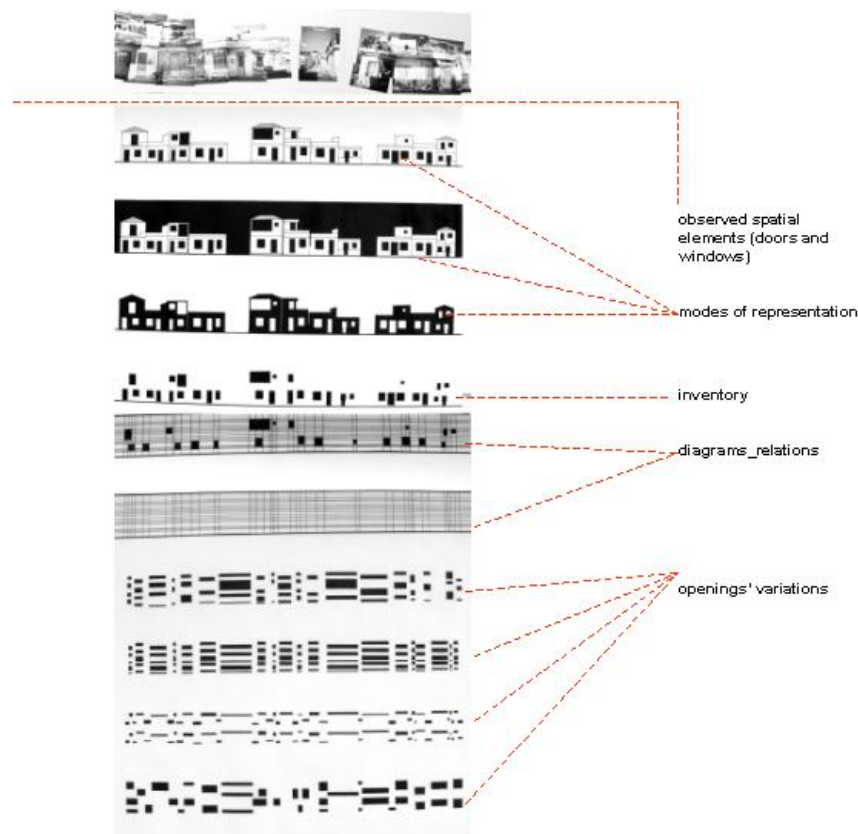
5. The studio process (First semester)

The first semester studio has 14 weeks duration. It is organized in two weekly studio sessions, four hours each. The process is structured in four phases. Each one has a individual outcome which creates the essential ground for the next phase of work.

Project 1: The spatial inventory (two weeks)

Students begin with walking in specific urban areas trying to establish an inventory of spatial elements. As stated above, enclosures, openings, boundaries, thresholds, edges, passages, landmarks, nature fractures, etc are some of the elements students identify and arrange in catalogues. Organizational criteria are of crucial importance. Students have to define those spatial similarities and differences that justify the element's entry into the catalogue. Location and relative position are also of importance.

Students use mainly photographs to identify and present the elements they choose. Additionally they use sketches or plans as a way to isolate the elements they focus on (fig.)



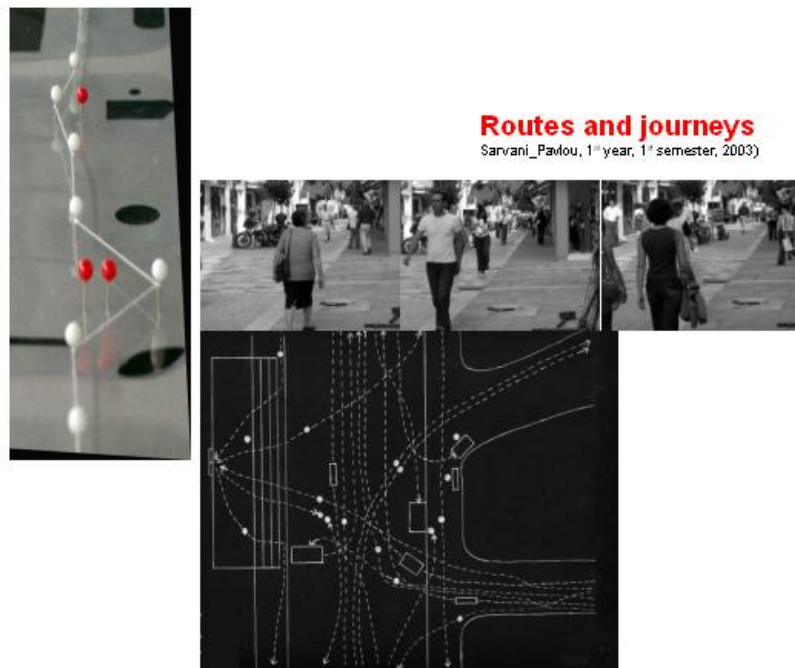
Facades' opening (doors and windows) are the basic elements of this inventory. The student has analysed the relative position of the elements and this analysis has led her into the creation of grid variation (student: Th. Makri).

Project 2: The human action inventory (two weeks)

The second inventory refers to human actions. It aims to facilitate students to understand the crucial relation between the human body and space. Students watch people walking, sitting, exchanging, dancing, waiting, constructing and they are asked to analyse both the variations of the actions (ie different ways of *waiting*) and the process of each action (ie skateboarding.)

Photographic shots remain the basic tool for representing their selections.

Additionally they use plans and small abstract models (fig) to represent the relation between spatial elements and actions observed.



Maps and abstract models of walking people relate the action to the space where the action has been observed (students N. Sarvani, E. Paulou, 2003)

Project 3: The route (three weeks)

This phase aims at exploring a variation of actions within space. It introduces the notion of narrative as a continuation of movement in space, which contains episodes. Students are encouraged to experience the city as framings of space and succession of sites organized as shots from different viewpoints. In this stage films become an important tool, which helps students to structure their perceptions and peripatetics. As G. Bruno argues film spectatorship is a practice of space that is dwelt in as in the built environment. The itinerary of such a practice is similarly drawn by a visitor to a city who also engages the anatomy of the streets as he traverses different urban configurations. This multiplicity of perspectives, resembles to a montage of “travelling” shots with diverse viewpoints and rhythms. Changes in the height, size, angle and scale of the view, as well as the speed of the transport, are embedded in the very language of filmic shots, editing and camera movements. Travel culture is written in the techniques of filmic observation ⁱⁱⁱ

During this stage students are walking for an hour in the city according to a set scenario (ie exploring the city as a flaneur, acquiring the role of a thief who seeks hiding places, assuming the role of a tourist trying to establish the identity of the city, etc).

Representing this process includes also stages of representation. First photographs and maps are used to describe the crucial points of the narrative. Then diagrams and abstract models are employed to define spatial elements and actions observed.



Project 4: Introducing programmatic limitations and design variations (7 weeks)

Up to this stage students have been introduced to the idea of spatial narrative incorporated in the urban experience. Moreover they have been introduced to the notion that spatial narratives can be analysed in spatial elements and human actions and that the students can use a variety of abstract forms to represent them.

In this final phase students are asked to design a small architectural structure which will be based on the ideas they have developed through their analysis.

First they are introduced to the idea that architecture is neither a static structure nor simply just built. Like all tangible artefacts, it is actually constructed, imaged, lived and manipulated. Like a film architecture it is constantly traversed by the histories both of its inhabitants and its transient dwellers^{iv}. Seen in this way, architecture and the city reveal their ties. In both cases relations are established between places and events that form and transform the spatial narratives (of the city or of the building).

An architectural structure (as the city) becomes imaged as narrative as sites are transformed by the sequence of movements of its traveller – dweller.

In this sense the idea of “architectural programme” is extended to include all kinds of spatial practises. Activities and functions, rhythms of movement, explorations, points of view generated along the moving inhabitant’s route, are all-important programmatic elements.

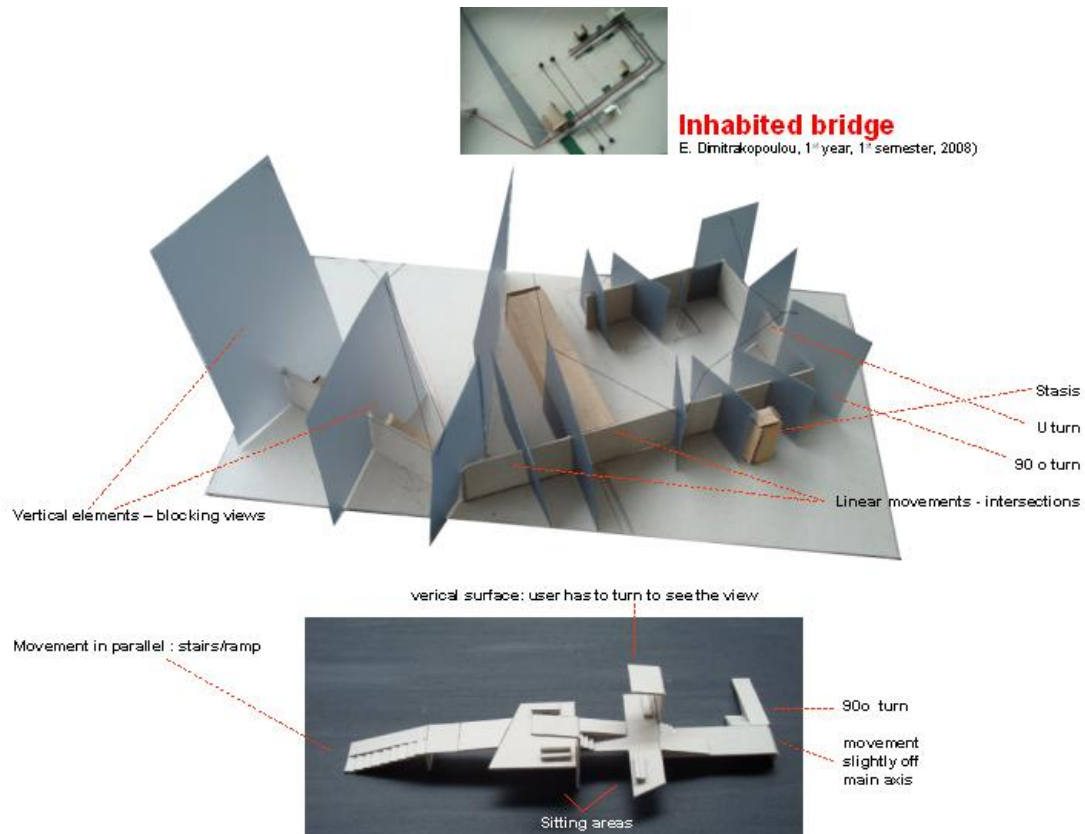
For this final project students have to design an architectural structure up to 100 sq m which will incorporate functional, visual, or other kinds of elements (ie relation with the nature, light and shadow, surprises, tensions and calms, scales, distances, etc) observed through the previous stages. This could be a small building, a landscape design, a structure in a playground, etc.

Each student is encouraged to develop his or her own programme for the new structure. In order to facilitate them using their previous observations we guide them towards projects where movement is an important programmatic element (ie exhibition spaces).

Example: Final Project I: The inhabited bridge (student: E. Dimitrakopoulou)

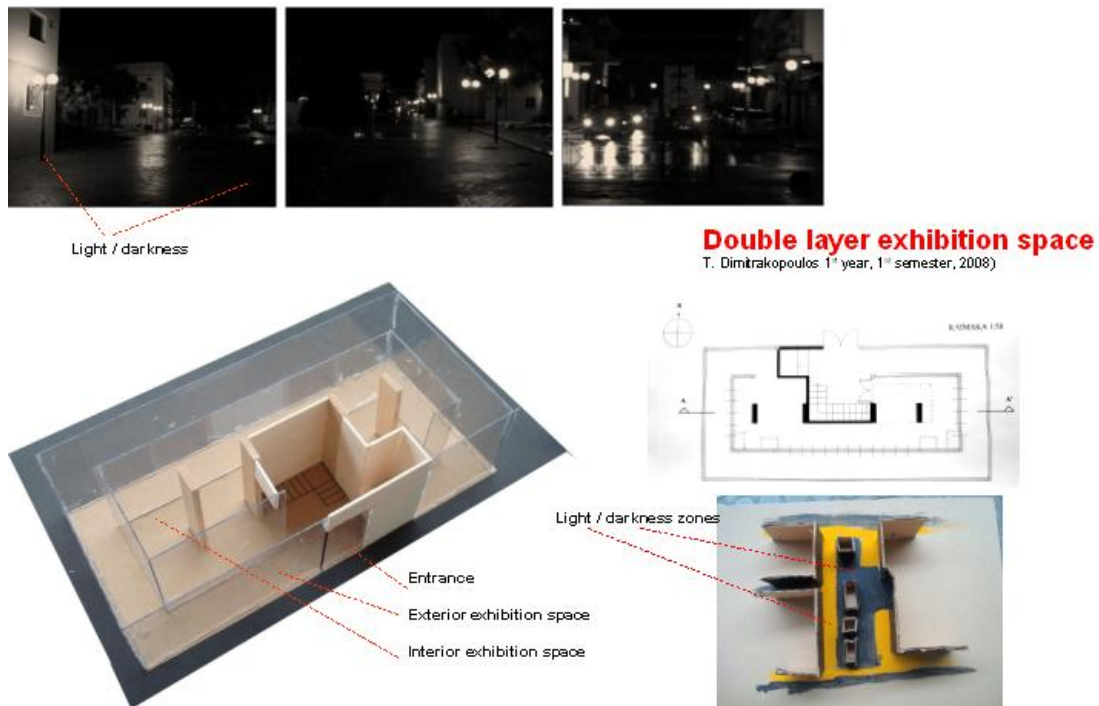
Information derived during the city walking is being used to produce a complex programme for a small bridge. Observations mainly focused on the multiple ways the human body accustoms itself to the spatial context while walking. During the specific route high buildings were blocking the mountain and sea views. The observed had to turn his body (to turn his head or to move off axis, to stop etc) to be able to fulfil his desire.

The bridge project incorporates these observations. The movement of the body becomes a major programmatic component. The user is not allowed to go across straight away. He is forced to go slightly off route so that he can enjoy all kind of views while being provided with the opportunity to sit for a while.



Example: Final Project II: Small exhibition space (student: T. Dimitrakopoulos)

The observations of the previous stage focused on differentiations of accessibility during the night, when a place is not fully illuminated. The student commented on the magic that it is created by the interplay of darkness and light in a public square and he noticed the different ways people are navigating according to the time of the day. These observations led to the design of a small exhibition space with two zones. One is internal and it can be darkened if needed. The other one is external with a glass wall and it is always illuminated. Depending on the exhibition these zones can function together (as in daylight) thus unifying the whole space or separately (as in darkness) providing different routes and views. The interplay of light and darkness and the possibilities of moving between the two have become the major programmatic elements of the new structure.



6. Conclusions

For introducing students to architectural studies, the use of narrative grounded in lived experience, seems to offer an alternative to topological or formal approaches.

The idea of “urban narrative” is the spine line of the educational methodology employed to introduce students to architectural studies during the first semester at the Dept. of Architecture, UTH. Lived experience and films are used as two educational strongholds which enable students to perceive and comprehend spatial qualities as well as the relation between human actions and space.

Urban narratives offer a crucial first step towards the understanding of the spatial qualities of architectural spaces. They present an easily handled parallel to architectural narratives and therefore to architectural design. Cities can be seen as series of *urban rooms* which are explored through the sequence of the visitor’s movement and which have properties making them habitable or inhabitable. Similarly to cities, architectural structures (be them buildings, objects or landscapes), are presented as places of experiencing life, places to be appreciated from inside out, through a complex process of moving, acting, exploring and discovering.

The process is not without difficulties. Students are impatient to enter the field of design straight away and they do not understand the value of the subsequent analysis and representation phases as a crucial part of the design process. On top of that they encounter difficulties in working with abstractions. They would prefer to be taught certain techniques so that they would have quick results instead of being asked to think and evaluate what they see.

During the last four years that this approach has been implemented at UTH we think that certain points have been made.

First, it has been declared that innovative design ideas and abilities are not an inherent quality of some of the students but a knowledge which can be developed through methodologies of education. It has been strongly argued that ideas are around us, in the real world ready to be perceived and reworked to produce something new.

Second, architectural design has been presented as a process instead of an outcome. Intermediate phases have been valued more than the final project. Ideally (if the studio lasted for a year instead of a semester) variations of a final project should replace the production of a single one. Within this process multiple representation techniques have been shown as of crucial importance as they have been used to formulate (and not to express) ideas.

Finally, the significance of the relation between the user and space has been stated. Architecture is not a work of art, perceived and enjoyed from a distance. On the contrary, it is space enveloping us, guiding our movements and forming our actions.

References

ⁱ The statement is cited in Kester Rattenbury, "Echo and narcissus", AD special issue "Architecture and Film" no 112, 1994, p.35

ⁱⁱ Eupalinos: L'ame et la danse: dialogue de l'arbre, Paris, Gallimard, 1944

ⁱⁱⁱ G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, Verso, 2002, p.62

^{iv} Op.cit. p.66